

Truman, Harry S.

The 33d president of the United States (1945-53), Harry S. Truman—the S. does not stand for any name—carried on the New Deal reform tradition and committed the nation to the containment of Soviet power. His policies shaped American politics and diplomacy for a generation.

EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Truman was born on May 8, 1884, in Lamar, Mo., and spent his early life in Independence, Mo., near Kansas City. He held various jobs after graduating from high school, then took over the family farm in 1906 and became active in Democratic politics, the Farm Bureau Federation, the Masonic Lodge, and the National Guard. After serving in France during World War I, Truman became a partner in a men's clothing store in Kansas City. When the business failed in 1921, he entered politics as an ally of Thomas J. PENDERGAST's Kansas City Democratic machine and won election to the Jackson County Court (county commission) in 1922. Defeated in 1924, he was elected presiding judge in 1926 and held the office for 8 years.

In 1934, Truman was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he supported the New Deal of Franklin D. ROOSEVELT. He barely won reelection in 1940. In 1941, however, Truman became chairman of a special Senate committee investigating inefficiency and corruption in World War II military spending programs. Widely praised for his committee work and liked throughout the Democratic party, he was chosen for the Democratic vice-presidential nomination in 1944, replacing Henry A. WALLACE. Vice-president for only 82 days, Truman became president when Roosevelt died on Apr. 12, 1945, and immediately faced serious foreign and domestic problems.

Presidency: First Term (1945-49)

With Germany's surrender (May 8, 1945), differences with the USSR began to come into the open. Determined to dominate Eastern Europe and control at least a portion of Germany, the Soviet government claimed the prerogative of establishing spheres of influence in violation of the principles of democracy and self-determination that had justified the war for most Americans. In July the POTSDAM CONFERENCE, Truman's only personal meeting with Joseph Stalin, provided no settlement. While at Potsdam, Truman authorized the use of the newly perfected atomic bomb against Japan. After the bombing of Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 9), Japan surrendered unconditionally on Aug. 14, 1945.

When the war ended, relations with the USSR degenerated into COLD WAR. The United States protested Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe with no effect. The USSR also supported a Communist-led insurrection in Greece, pressured Turkey for control of the straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, refused to withdraw wartime troops from northwestern Iran, and rejected an American proposal for United Nations control of atomic energy.

Truman countered with a policy of containment. In March 1946, reacting in part to American demands, the USSR pulled out of Iran. In March 1947, Truman asked Congress to vote heavy military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey and proclaimed the policy that became known as the Truman Doctrine—a program of assistance to countries resisting outside domination. The administration in 1947 also formulated the MARSHALL PLAN, an expensive, comprehensive program for the reconstruction of Western Europe. Partly in response the Russians staged a coup d'etat in Czechoslovakia in February 1948; they also blockaded the Western sector of Berlin (June 1948-May 1949) but were unable to force American withdrawal. Instead, the United States and the major non-Communist European nations negotiated the North Atlantic Treaty, forming NATO (see NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION), in 1949. Also in 1949, Truman introduced in Congress the POINT FOUR PROGRAM of technical aid for backward areas, intended to check the spread of communism.

Truman's domestic proposals, known as the FAIR DEAL, were built upon Roosevelt's New Deal and included broad social-welfare reforms. Willing to intervene extensively in the economy, Truman supported economic controls in times of emergency and backed legislation to underwrite full employment. He ordered (1948) the desegregation of the armed forces, let the Justice Department support blacks in civil rights cases, and was the first president since Reconstruction to have a legislative civil rights program.

Although he attempted to maintain the New Deal political coalition, Truman's political position was nevertheless precarious during his first term. A poor speaker with little personal appeal, he seemed a weak leader by comparison with the charismatic Roosevelt. Although his foreign policy initiatives won assent on Capitol Hill, his domestic legislation fared poorly. A Democratic Congress rejected most of his proposals in 1945-46; its most

important accomplishment, the Employment Act of 1946, established the Council of Economic Advisers but failed to guarantee full employment.

During the period of severe postwar inflation, Truman's attempts to prevent major strikes, including seizure of the coal mines during a 1946 walkout, alienated labor unions, while his efforts to maintain price controls angered business and agricultural interests. In September 1946, Truman dismissed Secretary of Commerce Henry WALLACE for criticizing the administration's tough line toward the USSR. The result was further division in a Democratic party already divided by Southerners' anger over Truman's civil rights program. Consequently, the Democrats lost the congressional elections of 1946. In 1947-48, Truman regained labor support with his unsuccessful veto of the Taft-Hartley Act (or LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS ACT), and he spiritedly denounced as reactionary a Republican Congress that would not pass his domestic programs. Truman seemed certain, however, to be a one-term president.

In the election of 1948 he faced opposition not only from Republican Thomas E. DEWEY but also from left-wing and southern factions of his own party that backed the Progressive candidate, Wallace, and States Righter (Dixiecrat) Strom THURMOND. Barnstorming the country, Truman pleased crowds with his peppery "give 'em hell" style and successfully presented himself as a scrappy underdog champion of the common people against the privileged. He won a narrow but startling upset victory with 49.5 percent of the vote to Dewey's 45.1 percent. The Democrats, moreover, regained control of Congress.

Presidency: Second Term (1949-52)

During his second term, Truman continued to work for domestic reforms but with limited success. He obtained increases in several ongoing New Deal programs, such as social security. He also secured passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which provided extensive federal subsidies for low- and middle-income housing. The other elements of his program all died in Congress.

By the end of 1949 reverses in the cold war had made communism the nation's major domestic issue. In mid-1949 the Chinese Nationalist government of CHIANG KAI-SHEK retreated to Taiwan, abandoning the mainland to the Communists. The Truman administration had sharply reduced American aid to the corrupt and inefficient Nationalists, and now, in the eyes of many, was responsible for the loss of China. Almost at the same time, moreover, the administration announced that the USSR had tested its first atomic bomb. Shortly thereafter came a stunning series of Communist espionage cases, including those of Alger HISS and Julius and Ethel ROSENBERG, that involved U.S. atomic secrets and possible penetration of sensitive government offices. Although Truman had authorized a stringent program of loyalty investigations of federal employees in 1947, he now came under wide attack for having been soft on Communist subversion. In early 1950, Republican Sen. Joseph R. MCCARTHY assumed leadership of the assault with repeated charges of Communist infiltration of the State Department and other key government agencies. With McCarthyism flourishing, Congress passed (1950), over Truman's veto, the MCCARRAN ACT, which restricted the civil rights of Communists.

Truman's prompt intervention in response to the invasion of South Korea by the Communist North in June 1950 brought him only more difficulties. By early 1951 the KOREAN WAR was at a frustrating stalemate. The president dismissed Gen. Douglas MACARTHUR for advocating drastic military measures against the Communists and, as a result, faced widespread disapproval. When Truman seized the steel industry in 1952 to avoid a strike and maintain defense production, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the seizure unconstitutional.

Further weakened by discoveries of corruption in his administration, Truman announced in March 1952 that he would not run for reelection. Adlai E. Stevenson, his choice for the Democratic presidential nomination, lost the election to Dwight D. Eisenhower. In retirement, Truman remained active in politics, wrote his *Memoirs* (2 vols., 1955-56) and *Mr. Citizen* (1960), lectured extensively, and helped establish the Truman Library. In the final years of his life he became almost a folk hero. Truman died on Dec. 26, 1972.

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